



ZPD ("Zone of Proximal Development") Diagram from "Afl" programme material

## A Misunderstanding

To conclude this part we will show how different and even opposite interpretations of learning theories can arise. We will try to show that the theory of Vygotsky, famous as it now is, can be followed in name, even while other, and even contrary, theories are being advanced.

Our text (attached) consists of excerpts from Module 1 of the Assessment for Learning (Afl) programme, which was, in 2013, in its second year. The programme is run by the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) via its Curtis Nkondo Professional Development Institute. It was developed by staff of the Tshwane University of Technology.

This programme is admirable in many ways, and it is successful. It also marks a clear advance for SADTU into the

overall leadership of education, above and beyond its role as a trade union and as a professional association, as previously conceived. With the Afl programme, SADTU is moving confidently on to ground that it did not fully occupy before, and it is doing so at a crucial moment in South Africa's history.

## **Quantity and Quality**

However, in this course of ours (now coming to the conclusion of its 7<sup>th</sup> part out of ten weekly parts) we are focussed on certain matters, which we have hitherto illustrated by comparing the ideas of Lev Vygotsky and those of Jean Piaget. The Afl document we are quoting has a section headed "Theories of Learning". It sets out the rational basis for the further proceedings of its course. It does not mention Piaget. It does rely quite heavily on Vygotsky, but in a strangely misunderstood fashion.

This misunderstanding reveals a particular difficulty in education.

Vygotsky was concerned to discover how children can, and do, successfully develop into mature adult members of society, which in his case was a dynamic, optimistic, revolutionary society – the Soviet Union, in its early years.

Vygotsky distinguished between qualitative development and quantitative learning. Like all communists, his presumption was that qualitative, substantive change of

nature is always the product of revolutionary crisis, whereas quantitative change is marginal, incremental, gradual and cumulative.

There is a relationship between the two kinds of change. In any given case, quantitative change will bring matters to the point where qualitative change is possible, and therefore, at once, inevitable. This understanding of gradual, quantitative change, leading to precipitate, revolutionary change, is one of the “tools of analysis” of Marxist practice.

Vygotsky studied the crises of childhood and adolescence, and found much more in them than trouble. He found that this is where the most important gains are made. This is where “development” happens, and where development means something different from, and greater than, learning.

Learning knowledge, of itself, does not cause a child to “grow up”. Accumulated knowledge only causes the child to complete tasks which, being complete, present the child with what Vygotsky calls a “predicament”. This means that the child cannot go on living in its old way, but must make a risky, frightening jump into a new way of living and being (“neoformation”).

Now see how our Afl document describes Vygotsky’s ideas:

*“Vygotsky argues that it is within the ZPD that all learning takes places. The implications of Vygotsky's theories for teachers is noted by Allrich (n.d.) who*

*notes that as learning proceeds, a portion of the Proximal Zone becomes part of the Present Knowledge, and as a consequence, a smaller Proximal Zone remains.”*

This is a misunderstanding. Vygotsky actually says that most learning takes place between crises. The kind of learning that takes place between crises is measurable, because it is by nature quantitative.

The much more important qualitative kind of change requires a special kind of attention. It is not like “all learning”. Vygotsky calls it “neoformation”, and he says that when such a transition is approaching, it is not helpful to expend a lot of energy on other things.

Let us now look at what Andy Blunden wrote in an e-mail to the CU:

*“The problem is that zoped [“Zone of Proximal Development”] was not a big concept for Vygotsky or his following, but when the theory got to the US (which as it happens is where Vygotsky got the concept in the first place) it really took hold. So in American renditions of Vygotsky's ideas, ZPD is transformed into the key concept. But like I said in my speech on Child Development, who would try to teach kids things they either couldn't do even when you helped them, or something they could do already without help?*

*“The point is to be aware of that obvious fact, and not wait until development happens somehow unaided, and the teacher can say “Oh Johnny can now add up so let's teach him addition.” (which is what Piaget tends to tell us.) The tricky bit, which is what Vygotsky was concerned with, is to know just which activity learning will bring in its wake a qualitative development - when a penny's worth of learning turns into a pound's worth of development. It is also a good idea to keep in mind when you are teaching a group (as you always are) and the kids are helping each other.”*

The above should be sufficient to defend Vygotsky's ideas, and to show that it is not all right to exchange, as in the diagram shown at the top (and again in the attached document), the word “development” for “learning goals”, or vice versa, and still attribute the idea to Vygotsky.

Learning goals are nominated by teachers or perhaps by the Department of Basic Education. Development, on the other hand, is a matter of necessity. The necessity is primarily social, and is bound up with biology and with aging. Development is not about facts and information.

In terms of the Afl, not much harm is done by this misunderstanding. The brief setting-out of the theoretical stall, even if it falsifies Vygotsky, serves the good purpose of preparing the ground for a necessary and beneficial

discussion of Learning Intentions and Success Criteria. These are undoubtedly vital pedagogical tools, and crucial to the assessment of learning, which is a good thing.

But the document fails to understand Vygotsky, and it therefore leaves unfinished business that is arguably much more important than the kind of learning that is being assessed and measured. This unfinished business is the growing-up of children into society as mature adults.

There is an assumption that those who get jobs, will be all right. And there is a second assumption, that if the children are well prepared they will all get jobs. Whereas there is nothing in history, or in logic, that makes either of these propositions to be any more than very unsafe assumptions.

What can teachers do about that? Vygotsky suggests that teachers should first keep their eyes on another prize, which is development of the personality within society.

Vygotsky's is a revolutionary suggestion. When teachers are ready for it, they will have to take it up. To paraphrase Vygotsky, this is a neoformation waiting to happen.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [First Module of Assessment for Learning, SADTU, 2012, Excerpts](#).
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